

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Further Adventures in Mescaline

by [Joseph Nechvatal](#) on June 4, 2014



Henri Michaux, "Sans Titre" (1960), India ink drawing, 40 x 60 cm (all images courtesy of Galerie Berthet-Aittouarès, Paris)

PARIS — Mind-blowing drugs are nothing new in French culture. Indeed, [Simone de Beauvoir](#) reported in [The Prime of Life](#) that Jean-Paul Sartre had a medically supervised mescaline injection in 1935, along with an unnamed intern. Sartre reported seeing lobsters, orangutans, and houses gnashing their jaws. The intern reported virtually romping through a meadow of nymphs. The following year, in 1936, [Antonin Artaud](#), through his friend the painter [Federico Cantú Garza](#), went to Mexico to live and study the ways of the [Tarahumaran people](#). There he took peyote, recording his experience in a volume called [The Peyote Dance](#). But apparently things really took off in the middle of the dreadfully conservative 1950s.

In [Adventure of the symbols](#), a retrospective show of thirty India ink drawings by poet, journalist, and artist [Henri Michaux](#) at Galerie Berthet-Aittouarès, I found Michaux building on his mid-1950s mescaline inspired breakthrough drawings loosely called "Dessin mescalinen" (Mescaline Drawing) (1956–57). They are shimmering dark drawings done during various phases of neurological excitement induced by mescaline. That the work was electrified by ingesting mescaline (the active ingredient of the peyote cactus) is well known through Michaux's own 1950s books: *Miserable Miracle: Mescaline* (originally published in

French in 1956 and first translated into English in 1967), *Turbulent Infinity* (1957) and *Paix dans les brisements* (1959). (For more on the neurological excitement induced by mescaline in the 50s as it may affect the creative mind, see Aldous Huxley's 1954 publication [The Doors of Perception](#), a well-known account Huxley wrote after taking mescaline in 1953 under the guidance of the Canadian psychiatrist and researcher [Humphrey Osmond](#).)



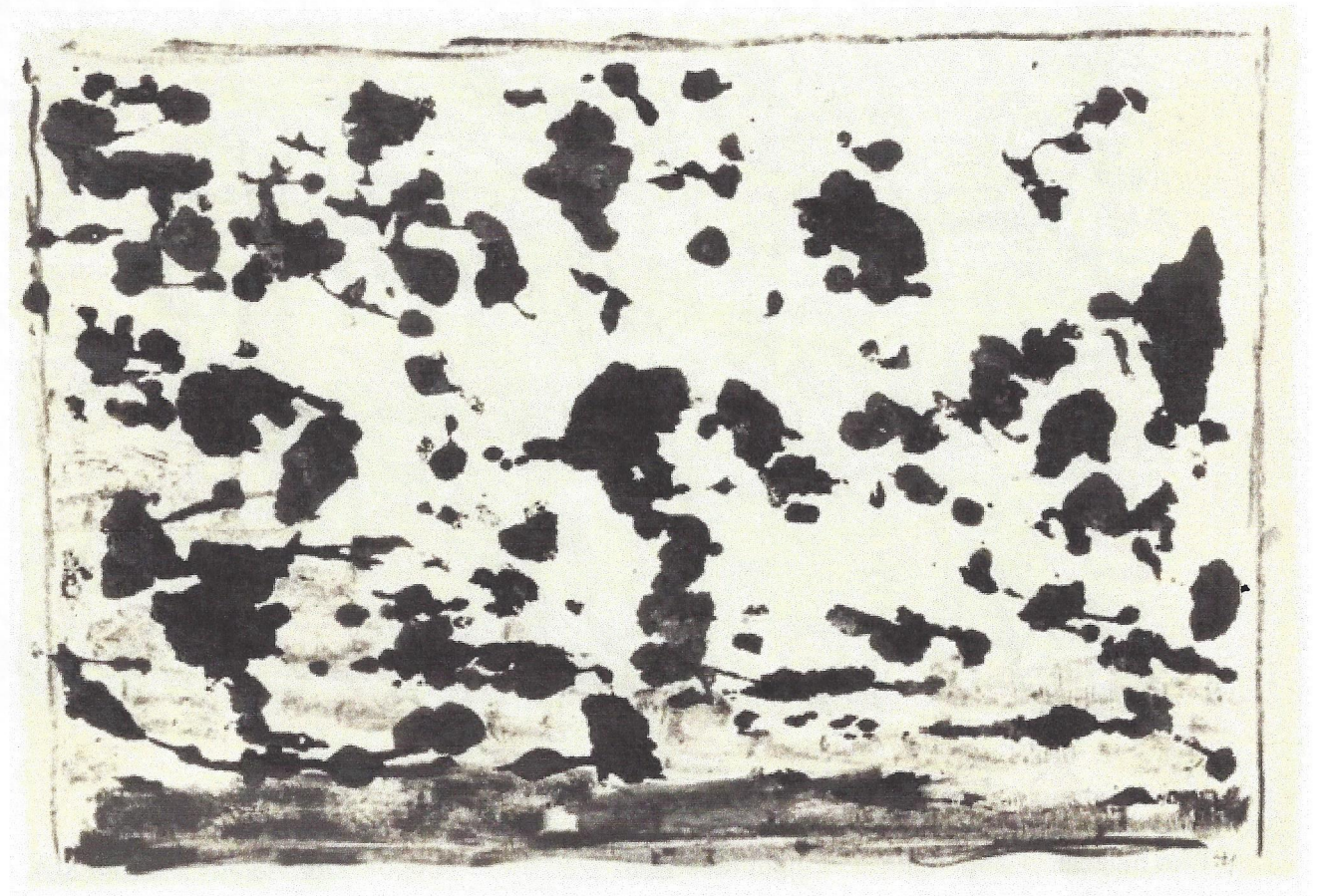
Henri Michaux, "Mouvement" (1950) India ink drawing, 30 x 25 cm

Of course, the dried heads of the peyote cactus, whose main active ingredient is mescaline, were used by the Aztecs at least as early as 300 BC, and are currently being employed by over fifty thousand Indians of the Native American Church as a vital part of their religious ceremonies. The peyote cactus has long been used by the Indians of the Southwest and Mexico as a means of communion with the divine world, and today the eating of the dried buttons of the plant is the principal sacrament of the Native American Church of the United States.

In looking at Michaux's "Dessin mescalinen" untitled drawings, I saw and sensed a vibratory aesthetic energy made manifest in a diagrammatic, viral manner. Viral because, according to Robert Hunter in "[The Acid Queen](#)" chapter of his *The Storming of the Mind*, the mescaline molecule resembles adrenaline. When mescaline is introduced into the body, enzymes, mistaking the mescaline molecules for adrenaline, begin to dissolve them. While the enzyme's attention is focused on the mescaline, however, the adrenaline reproduces and finds a hosting zone elsewhere in the brain — the enzymes can't handle both.

Michaux's works create a hovering feeling from the spread of signs found scattered throughout space. *Adventure of the symbols* demonstrates this with a nice array of early pre-mescaline "Mouvement" drawings (1950–51). But I was particularly interested in the delicate post-mescaline "Sans Titre" (Untitled) works (1956 on) that have the systematic, but out-of-control, vibrational quality of a nervous robot-seismograph. In these drawings, vibratory energy is made manifest. There were no explicit "dessin post-mescalinen" or "dessin de reagregation" (both 1962–63) drawings included in this show, but all the post mid-50s field

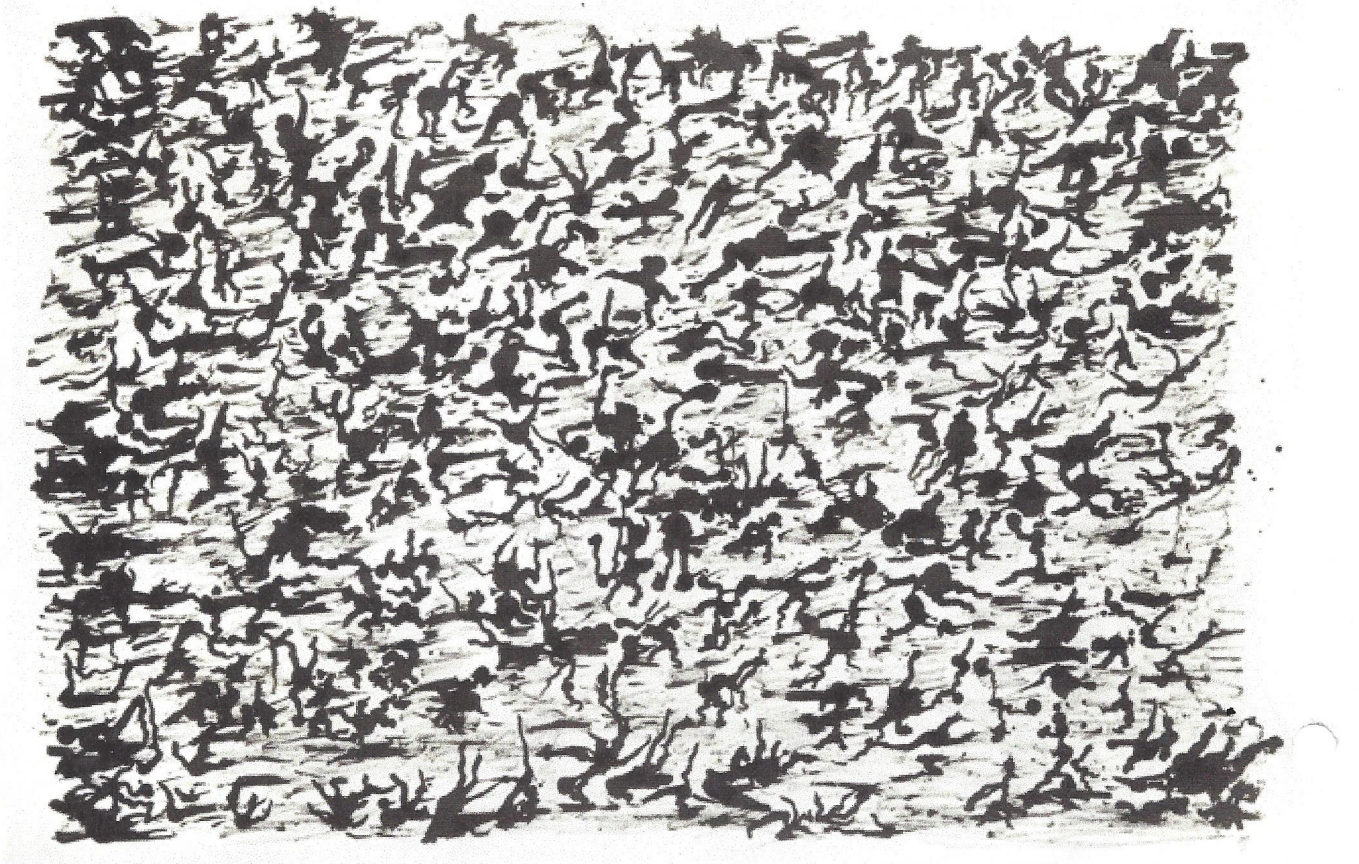
drawings have the same ripe delirium, the same chimerical electronic vibration, as those.



Henri Michaux, "Sans Titre" (1960), India ink drawing, 40 x 60 cm

Michaux's works here are a snarl of vicissitudes so intertwined that it must give birth to different scopes of thought and perception. Through this articulation, grammar may appear as semi-abstract, because in his art the sign no longer consists only of representations but of inner codes that in turn may represent other representations, and so on, as the links of surreal thought require.

In free-flowing works like the untitled series from 1960, habitual values and expectations of solidity no longer exist *ipso facto*. They elucidate for us (again) that art may refuse to recognize all thought as existing in the form of representation; that by scanning the entire spread of representation art may formulate an understanding of the laws that provide representation with its basis: the rare aesthetic that is at once seamless and fragmented.



Henri Michaux, "Sans Titre" (1960), India ink drawing, 45 x 32 cm

Like mescaline-engendered thought (see [Alan Watts's](#) 1962 book [The Joyous Cosmology](#)), Henri Michaux's post-mescaline art, by virtue of its distinctive constitution as networked fluidity, floats us in an extensive stratosphere of virtuality. In an osmotic membrane, it is art as a blotter of instantaneous ubiquity and proliferation.

Michaux's drawings from 1960 depict a sort of behind-the-scenes vibrating world, deep and dense enough that representation finds itself joined together in surreal suppositions. Non-logocentric works like these can perhaps direct us towards that capricious, vibrating zone, that always inaccessible arena, which dives down, beyond our gaze, towards the very velvety heart of things. Indeed it is this quivering semi-cohesion that maintains the sovereign and secret sway over each and every sign — this vibration — which I find interesting in Michaux. Something beyond reductive abstraction or glib representation. Something excessive, hybrid, semi-abstract.



Henri Michaux, "Sans Titre" (1960), India ink drawing, 45 x 32 cm

Obviously, Michaux's post-mescaline work is a work of overload. The drawings are to be understood as a flustered code-field of vibratory energy. And since prevailing representation is made up of conventional, rigid, social signs (and art typically of unconventional irresponsible signs — the mode that represents the real arbitrary nature of all signs as it subverts the socially controlled system of meaning) Michaux's work offers us the opportunity for the creation of anti-social signs (semi-abstract, ecstatic, anti-signs) which continue to mentally move and multiply. Henri Michaux's aesthetic work is an offer for us to achieve an integration of figure and ground by dissolving discrete information into a primary vibrational and dynamic underpinning.

Encounters with Michaux's work, I suggest, create an opportunity for transgression, as his type of high counsel provides a quivering defiance to the world's sedate blandness. Daily thoughts detach themselves and float up into the higher realm of imagination, of fantasy, and into non-knowledge. Yet Michaux's aesthetic non-knowledge is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious area of our identity, as it is the surface-and-depth from which all representation emerges in its precarious, but glittering, existence.

[Adventure of the symbols](#) continues at *Galerie Berthet-Aittouarès (29 rue de Seine 75006 Paris) through June 28th.*

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